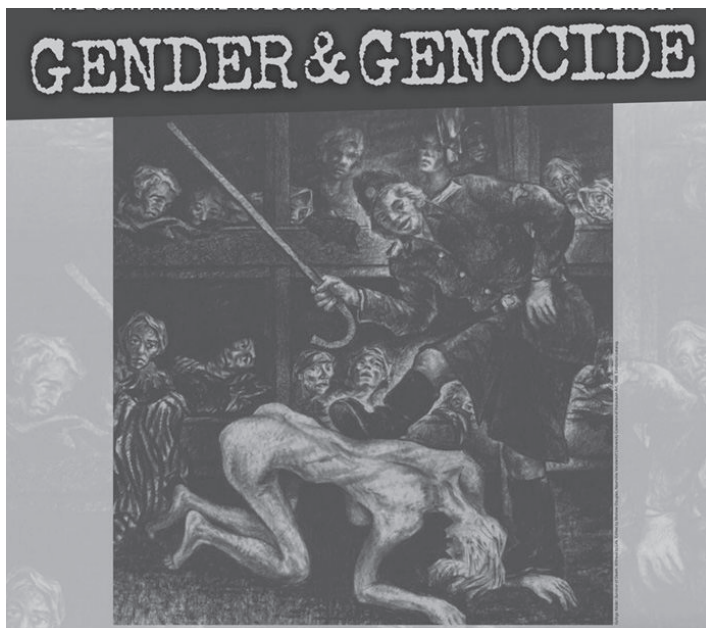


HISTORY AT VANDERBILT: KEEPING THE MEMORY ALIVE

The History of the Vanderbilt Holocaust Lecture Series

For years, the Vanderbilt University Holocaust Lecture Series has brought in guest speakers and academic scholars to give presentations on the history of the Holocaust. Begun in 1967 under the direction of Beverly Asbury, the program has grown in scope and popularity on campus over the years. The History at Vanderbilt section of this journal seeks to elaborate on the role that history has played at our university, and how it has continually shaped our understanding of the past.

By the Editorial Board of the *Vanderbilt Historical Review*
Vanderbilt University



Poster of the Vanderbilt University Holocaust Lecture Series' 2015 Program - "Gender & Genocide" (2015)
Source: *Holocaust Lecture Series*

"I have tried to keep memory alive... I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices."¹

Elie Wiesel, novelist and Holocaust survivor
On being asked what he has done with his life
December 10th, 1986

Now in its 38th consecutive year, the Vanderbilt University Holocaust Lecture Series is the longest-running program of its kind in the country. The series, currently directed by University Chaplain Mark Forrester, History Professor Michael Bess, and a committee of students, faculty, staff, and members of the Nashville academic community, brings together guest speakers from around the world who specialize in the history and historiography of the Holocaust. These speakers offer insight into not only the past, but also, perhaps more significantly, the importance of remembering these events. Past themes for the program include "Science, Technology, and the Holocaust," "Arts of Remembrance," and "Making and Evoking Memory." This year's

theme, "Gender and Genocide," focused on the "multifaceted entanglements of gender" during the Holocaust that "provide insight into some of the most salient and challenging issues in contemporary society." These events expound upon the economic, political, and social influences that ultimately shaped the lives of those individuals and continue to shape the society in which we live.² As the Elie Wiesel quote above suggests in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, the series is significant in its efforts to remember our past and how it has shaped who we are today.

HISTORY OF VANDERBILT

Vanderbilt University has continually emphasized a well-rounded education in which "the youth of the church and country may prosecute theological, literary, scientific, and professional studies" freely.³ With Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt's \$1 million gift, Vanderbilt University was born in 1873. Bishop Holland McTyeire was one of the leading figures in its founding, helping to shape the university in a way that emphasized both the liberal arts and pre-professional areas of study. In his creation of the "Harvard of the South," he sought to expand upon the liberal arts education in particular by creating a Literature, Science and Philosophy department.⁴ This department was the predecessor to the Arts & Science college we have today.

After many waves of professors and chancellors, Chancellor Branscomb entered office. He envisioned a cooperative ministry that would serve all campus Christian denominations: Methodist, Presbyterian, Disciples, and the United Church of Christ. His legacy continued several years after he left the position when, in 1967, Mr. Beverly A. Asbury was appointed to the new position of University Chaplain.⁵ He was connected with the student body in their everyday affairs, and was "very deeply involved in large moral and ethical issues."⁶ The next semester, he created a Vanderbilt Inter-Faith Association (VI-FA), which would serve "Jews, Moslems, [and] any other interested religious group."⁷ Effectively, the first University Chaplain carried out Holland's goal of opening the university to new ways of religious and moral thinking.

The Holocaust Lecture Series began in 1977 under the direction of Mr. Asbury. He filled a role which had no defined

responsibilities or any set goals. Ultimately, his vision for the series was shaped by his desire to speak with various academic disciplines at the university and present a lecture that would encompass multiple schools of thought. Challenged by such a task, he looked toward the various schools at Vanderbilt and sought to reach out to them through a program that could unite their common interests. He dabbled with the idea of hosting an annual lecture that would focus on a topic that would appeal to faculty and students alike. This lecture would center around the Holocaust, an event that has had a tremendous global impact and changed the way we understand human nature. He envisioned highlighting a different, focused theme each year, since no single lecture could encompass the vast number of topics pertinent to the study of the Holocaust. At the program's inception, the original goal was to create a committee of various faculty members who would sit on the board to foster this series. The interests of multiple university organizations could be represented at each lecture. Over the years, the series has also expanded its board to student representatives, who can identify interests of the general student body and help incorporate those inter-

last generation to have lived through the Holocaust begin to pass away, it is more important than ever to capture the last remnants of their oral history. Reverend Forrester emphasized that these "living testimonies" stand as a stark reminder that the horrors of World War II, in particular the genocidal campaigns, are not as distant and obscure as some may believe. Systematic murders of mass populations have occurred in Rwanda, Cambodia, former Yugoslavia, and other nations in recent decades; by remembering these events, attendees of the Holocaust Lecture Series can hope to learn from the past and better understand human nature. Not only does it offer Vanderbilt students and the Nashville community a means of learning about the events of the Holocaust, but the series also embodies Vanderbilt University's commitment to memorializing the past and offering the world something more: the ability to continue the study of Jewish history and historiography, to understand the psychological effects of genocide and warfare, and to comprehend the world in which we live in today. In such an endeavor, the Holocaust Lecture Series plays an integral role in developing the narrative that has shaped our past.

“... the retelling of these women’s stories reflects today’s issues of gender equality and the comprehension of not just a ‘his’ or ‘her’ story, but rather of one our collective experience.”

ests into the presentations. Together, the monthly meetings of the Holocaust Lecture Series Committee are the backbone of Mr. Asbury's program.

Mr. Asbury was also involved in other similar endeavors, including the Racial Environment Project, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Series, and the Holocaust Art Collection.⁸ His role in the Holocaust Lecture Series was perhaps the most influential, because it has expanded to become one of the most prominent programs of its kind. With faculty members, student advocates, and local organization leaders, the Holocaust Lecture Series has grown tremendously over the years and welcomes members of the entire Nashville community.

Reverend Mark Forrester, the current University Chaplain at Vanderbilt University, is one of the main administrators of the program. He currently leads the Office of the University Chaplain and Religious Life (OUCRL), which helps to administer the costs, key relationships, and sponsorship of the program. The *Vanderbilt Historical Review* spoke with Rev. Forrester about why he decided to take on this endeavor. Since the tragic events of the Holocaust, a "Never Forget" mentality has thrived among historians and individuals who seek to remember the past in order to not repeat it (so stated by philosopher George Santayana).⁹ Currently, as the

THE HOLOCAUST LECTURE SERIES TODAY

Today, the Holocaust Lecture Series attracts historians, political activists, think-tank pundits, actors and actresses, and World War II survivors from around the world. On October 12th, 2015, Professor Wendy Lower of Claremont McKenna College gave a presentation at the 38th Annual Holocaust Lecture Series at Vanderbilt University. She discussed her recent book, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, in which she describes the role that women played during the Holocaust on the Eastern Front. The stories of these women, as well as the lost stories of others, are important for understanding the overall historiography of the Holocaust. Lower's goal was not to create a distinct "women's history" account, but rather to show that there can be no gender separation; both men and women occupied a shared sphere of influence over the killing of Jews. From secretaries to nurses, many were culpable of the heinous war crimes of which their male counterparts were accused. Lower argues that if historians ignore the role of these women, the stories will soon be lost over time, and a significant portion of the Holocaust history will be forgotten. She wishes to retell the story of these women's experiences because they show a clearer picture of how Eastern Europe's Jewish victims were treated. By digging through the archives recently available in Berdychiv, Ukraine, she has been able to expound upon nu-

History at Vanderbilt: Keeping the Memory Alive

merous new micro-histories of individuals (both victims and perpetrators), and thus, in doing so, was able to offer a new interpretation of the events that transpired during the Holocaust: In a way, the retelling of these women's stories reflects today's issues of gender equality and the comprehension of not just a "his" and "her" story, but rather one of our collective experience.



Eva Kor, Romanian survivor of the Holocaust (2014)
Source: *Holocaust Lecture Series*

At another recent event, the series brought together four experts in areas of genocide and sex-based crimes against humanity. Jocelyn Kelly, director of the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's (HHI) Women in War program, emphasizes how sexual assaults on victim populations can "destabiliz[e] communities and destroy profiles" of the individuals.¹⁰ Not only are the direct deaths felt throughout the communities of victims, but "dehumanization efforts" also attack the very foundation of society. Ms. Kelly researches genocide and human rights violations in Eastern and Central Africa. Another speaker was Dr. Elisa Von Joeden-Forgey, Assistant Professor in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Stockton University. Her research focuses on how genocidal attacks can affect family institutions. Notable examples in Japan and Sierra-Leone highlight the impact of these "ritualized atrocities."¹¹ Gender is not just an aspect of genocide, but it is an integral part of mass-murder campaigns. The perpetrators of crimes often attack those whom they see as inferior. Although they may physically kill a human being, it is important to note that the immoral methods through which they committed such atrocities succeeded in dehumanizing and subduing entire populations. In a way, this subjugation is what separates a genocide from other systematic killing programs; traumatic experiences can forever change a group's mentality.

The Holocaust itself was a central event of the 20th century, and its effects carry distinctively into the 21st. It has changed the way we interpret characteristics of human nature and the atrocities of which the human mind is capable. Bringing together a multitude of speakers from across the world helps to expose the bigger picture of genocide over the course of human history. Understanding genocides helps clarify the role of victimization in society today, particularly for understanding modern gender violence. Many affected groups feel a stigma associated with silence and vulnerability to this day. Both male and female victims of genocide are abused and marginalized to an extent incomprehensible except to those who have lived through such horrors. The members of the panel seek to understand historical events concerning sexual-based violence and its ramifications in an endeavor to prevent further victimization in the present day.


"MORAL DIMENSIONS"¹²

According to Holocaust-survivor Eva Kor, the importance of remembering the past revolves around "linking the memory of what happened during World War Two to specific problems of the present day, like racism and various forms of dehumanization of people that still pose a problem and a danger of allowing genocides to happen again."¹³ The series is not only about retelling what happened—including facts, statistics, and tragic photos—but ultimately about exploring how the past raises questions of morality and refining perspectives. In one lecture from his course, "World War II" (HIST 2720), Professor Bess remarks on the struggle that historians face as to how to interpret the past. While the past itself is static (dates, names, events), the methods of interpretation are not. How we understand what happened is dynamic, constantly shifting with our perception of human nature and events that happen around the world today. A basic aspect of the human condition is our ability to study given facts, make various conclusions about why something happened, and interpret the reasons for its occurrence. To that end, history is constantly changing, evolving by the archives found, assumptions used, questions posed, and the underlying motive of the author(s). It is in this dynamic nature that the Holocaust Lecture Series can offer the world community a new perspective on the past.

As Associate Professor of Jewish Studies Jay Geller believes, the Holocaust Lecture Series helps individuals acknowledge the complex nature of historical understanding. It is not enough just to know an event happened.¹⁴ To understand the Holocaust, one must also recognize the perspectives of everyone involved (perpetrators, bystanders, victims, rescuers), and what took place before and after it. We can never get a complete picture, but we can learn that the Holocaust is about people's lives as well as their deaths. Professor Geller states that Holocaust was not just a "Jewish problem," but one that challenged our ethical understanding of humankind. In the same way that sexism today isn't just a "woman's problem," or racism a "minority's problem," the Holocaust Lec-

ture Series can attempt to modify this misguided mentality by presenting information to the listeners, which can lead them to formulate new perspectives on their present.

By bringing together groups of individuals with different backgrounds and viewpoints on the war, history can be better understood and ultimately interpreted. Through a collection of research papers, *Vanderbilt Historical Review* ties together the facts and perspectives, allowing for a greater understanding and appreciation for history, and the human condition. The *Vanderbilt Historical Review* recognizes the importance of such a program in promoting history-based

dialogue that focuses on events of the past. In our publication, we do not simply present to the reader more facts and statistical information, but rather strive to delve deeper into history by offering various interpretations and arguments so that readers may formulate their own perspectives through which they can analyze history. We would like to commend the program, including all its supporters, sponsors, and faculty, on being able to explore the past here at Vanderbilt University. And it is with our publication, the Holocaust Lecture Series, and numerous initiatives on-campus and abroad that we, the interpreters of our past, may hope to never forget the reason we study history. 

Endnotes

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- [5] "Vanderbilt Holocaust Lecture Series," *Vanderbilt University*; Mr. Asbury was also a founding member of the Tennessee Holocaust Commission, member of the Education and Church Relations Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and served on the executive board of the Association of Holocaust Organizations; Carol Rittner, John K. Roth, *"Good News" After Auschwitz?: Christian Faith Within a Post-Holocaust World* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 204.
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